

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 5
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 26

August 2001

Stories From Ocotal

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Recommended Citation

Zepeda, José Ramón (2001) "Stories From Ocotal," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 26.
Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss2/26>

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Stories from Ocotal

These stories are dedicated to all the people who have contributed, in one way or another, to the removal of mines worldwide and to the mine victims who must make the daily effort to reclaim their lives. Thank you Neyrín, Porfirio and Juan, and may God protect you. —José Ramon Zepeda B

■ A painting by Neyrín depicting his accident.



By José Ramon Zepeda B, Administrative Secretary
PADCA-OEA

Neyrín Rivera, 13 years old

Neyrín lives in Jalapa, near the Honduras border. This area is one of the most heavily mined regions in Nicaragua. Most of the inhabitants work the land and raise livestock. Neyrín's parents, Mario Rivera and María Matilde Aguilar, work in the field and struggle for a better life day in and day out.

On the morning of April 26, 1994, when he was barely 6 years old, Neyrín was helping relocate the family livestock when the cow he was with stepped on a mine. Neyrín was severely wounded and lay on the ground for almost two hours before his mother and uncle, hearing his cries from their home, were able to reach him. Neyrín's right leg had to be amputated below the knee.

Today, Neyrín is in his second year at the middle school. He has overcome his disability so that he plays as other children do and walks (or bicycles) one hour to and from school every day. His father helps him carry his bicycle down the steep hill from their one-room house and across the stream onto the dirt road. In the afternoon, his father waits by the stream for Neyrín to come home to help bring the bicycle back to the house.

Neyrín is also an artist whose paintings show a preci-

sion and attention to detail that belie his mere 13 years of age: trees with varying colors of leaves, elegant ducks and a log bridge with cutouts for placing your feet. Somewhere in all of his paintings there is a little injured boy and his dead cow. Recently, Neyrín participated in an art competition sponsored by various international organizations to promote the upcoming Third Meeting of States Parties of the Mine Ban Treaty. Neyrín received an honorable mention for his painting.

Demining Assistance Program of the Organization of American States (PADCA-OEA) helped Neyrín obtain the medical and physical rehabilitation that he needed, including his first prosthesis. They continue to provide assistance as Neyrín grows and requires new prostheses to fit him.

Porfirio Gómez Zamora, 50 years old



Porfirio is a man who has always tried to improve himself. Having only had the opportunity to complete the second year of high school, at the age of 32 he went back to school to

study commercial accounting. However, in the 1980's, the economic and political situation in Nicaragua offered few opportunities to better one's life. So Porfirio, along with two friends named Cresencio and Raúl, planned to immigrate to Honduras, not far from their native town of Jalapa, in order to search for work.

On June 15, 1984, the three friends were traversing a place called Cerro La Jungla Siuce when Raúl stepped on a mine. Raúl and Cresencio died instantly. Porfirio was badly injured, losing his right leg above the knee.

Since then Porfirio's life has changed dramatically, as one might expect. Although the economic situation in Nicaragua makes it difficult for anyone to make a living, people with disabilities find it especially hard. Much of their difficulties are imposed by social attitudes as opposed to any physical limitation. "There are many jobs one can

do with only one leg," claims Porfirio, "yet no one will hire me because of my disability."

Today Porfirio is an activist for the mine awareness campaign. He has given radio and television interviews at a local TV station in attempts to educate people about mines and disability awareness. Porfirio seems to take advantage of every opportunity to further the cause of mine victims. Drawing on his accounting/business background, he has worked out proposals for three income-generating cooperatives for about 30 landmine survivors and their families (a chicken farm, a pig farm and a dairy farm) but has yet to secure the seed money for these small businesses.

In May 2001 Porfirio participated in the Raising the Voices Survivor Advocate Leadership Training Program in Geneva, Switzerland. There, he and seven other survivors from the Americas region received international human rights' training and participated in the Intercessional Meetings of the Mine Ban Treaty. Porfirio will again represent survivors from his region at the Third Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty that will take place in Managua in September.

PADCA-OAS has helped Porfirio obtain medical and rehabilitative services and provided logistical assistance for other activities to promote his social reintegration.

Juan Ramón López, 42 years old



Juan was born on October 5, 1958 in Mozonte, a village in the province of Nueva Segovia. As a very young boy Juan worked on coffee farms, cutting and planting the coffee. Of humble circumstances, his family could only afford to send him to school until the third grade. The lack of economic opportunities in his community led Juan to leave home at the age of 16 in search of work.

In 1972, at the age of 14, Juan joined the ranks of the Sandanistas but left them after nine months. He was then captured by Somoza's National Guard. However, he came out of that experience and the accusations against him unharmed. When the Sandanistas triumphed in 1979, they accused Juan of being a traitor to the revolution and he was forced to flee to Honduras. In search of protection in the northern mountains, he had no other choice but to join a contra-revolutionary guerilla group called MILPAS. After Violeta Chamorro was elected president of Nicaragua in 1990, Juan entered the demobi-

lization program that the Organization of American States (OAS) helped implement.

The 20 year-long war had devastated Nicaragua. Many fields had been mined and therefore rendered useless, which contributed to the already dire economic circumstances. Juan needed to work. During the war, Juan had learned to detect mines and take them out of the ground as a matter of survival. So, he was able to find work as a "peasant deminer", employed by farm and plantation owners who needed their land cleared in order to return the fields to productivity.

Without the training, equipment, and support that professional deminers have, Juan still managed to remove 3,058 mines from the ground in the municipalities of Dipilto, Mozonte, and San Fernando. But the 3,059th mine took Juan's lower left leg. On December 17, 1997, Juan stepped on a mine while demining. Juan received a prosthesis and recovered well enough to work his own land. On July 11, 1998, Juan was surveying his own land when he lost his balance and fell into a ditch. That fall set off a mine explosion which blew off his lower right leg and the recently fitted prosthesis on his left leg, as well as causing serious injuries over almost his entire body.

With the helps of the OAS assistance program (PADCA-OEA), Juan received new prostheses and rehabilitative care. He takes great pride in the fact that although he has lost both legs, the thousands of mines he has removed will never kill or maim anyone else. Juan's bad luck with mines and his perseverance in the face of it has made him the subject of a joke throughout the surrounding communities. People say that the next time Juan López steps on a mine he will lose his head. But it will be OK because he will just get a prosthetic one and continue to be as powerful a force for good as he was before. Although somewhat cynical, the joke also testifies to the fact that Juan is a man of great energy with the will to provide a better life for his family and his people.

Today Juan is the president of the Council for Indig-

Although commonly practiced, "peasant demining" is highly dangerous and illegal in Nicaragua. Peasant deminers do not have the proper training nor the equipment to demine within a reasonable margin of safety. In Nicaragua, legal deminers are military personnel, receive expert training, use adequate demining technology, wear protective clothing, receive logistical support, and have ambulances, medical staff, and helicopters standing by to whisk them to a hospital in case there is an accident. Peasant deminers often work alone in a field with no metal detectors. They just step carefully and use a knife to pry away the dirt from suspicious looking objects. If there is an accident, help may not arrive for hours or even days. Landowners typically pay peasant deminers a better wage than they could earn elsewhere. Thus, the landowners' need to return their land to productivity and the often desperate economic situation of the peasants contribute to the common practice of illegal demining and therefore to the number of landmine accidents.

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enous People in Mozonte. His disability has not been an obstacle in managing the many projects he has started for the benefit of his community. For example, Juan began, sought funding and implemented a project to build houses for people who lost their homes to Hurricane Mitch. He also manages handicrafts projects that bring an in-

come to those who need it most in his municipality. It is safe to say that this landmine victim has always fought for the right to a better life for himself and others, and we are sure that he will continue to fight for the social and economic reintegration of all people with disabilities in Nicaragua. ■

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Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction, Vol. 5, Iss. 2 [2001], Art. 26

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**All photos courtesy of the Landmine Survivors Network.*